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# Teaching Tomorrow's Leaders Through Mentoring

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By Cheryl Beeler

**M**entoring is a management phenomenon that is extremely important in developing young, ambitious professionals. Many of the leading professionals in parks and recreation will readily admit the importance of mentors in their own careers. Research has shown that a mentoring relationship contributes significantly to career development, facilitates access to positions of leadership, authority or power, and has helped actualize potential.

Although mentoring is acclaimed by successful individuals as an important aspect of organizational and professional life, the body of knowledge about mentoring is limited. If mentoring is an integral part of developing good administrators who then become leaders in the parks and recreation field, it is our responsibility to learn as much as possible about the mentoring process and then take provocative steps in contributing to the growth and development of young, achievement-orientated individuals.

A mentoring relationship consists of two persons: a mentor and a protégé. In a management context, the mentor is a person who is considered a superior performer and has developed a good reputation over the years. He or she knows a lot about the organization, especially its informal political structure. The mentor knows the history behind the organization, its values, and expectations. A good mentor understands and has practiced networking inside and outside the organization. Most of all, the mentor is thought of as a trusted friend and counselor by the protégé.

The protégé is a person receiving guidance and direction from the mentor. Typically, protégés are young professionals in their careers who are considered by the mentors as the leaders of tomorrow. They are college educated, achievement-oriented, have a high energy level, and possess the basic skills and abilities that, when fully developed, will lead to success. A protégé is known for his or her exceptional positive attitude.

The relationship between a mentor and a protégé usually begins informally, without acknowledgment by either party. Sometimes a person will have no idea he or she is considered a mentor. More than likely, in a management environment the mentor is a person within the organization serving as the immediate boss to the protégé. However, it is not uncommon to find a college faculty member or former boss serving as a mentor. The relationship seems to develop because the mentor likes the protégé and sees his or her potential, and the protégé likes and trusts the mentor and respects his or her accomplishments. A psychological bonding links the two together.

Very little is known about how often mentors and protégés communicate and under what circumstances. They communicate informally on an ongoing basis whether in the office, at lunch, on the telephone, by mail or at professional society gatherings.

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Resource Center  
Mentor Program  
State of California  
Alcohol and Drug Programs  
1700 K Street  
Sacramento, CA 95814

(800) 444-3066 (California Only)  
(916) 327-3728  
FAX: (916) 323-1270  
TTY: (916) 445-1942  
Internet: <http://www.adp.cahwnet.gov>

In most mentoring relationships, the individuals have chosen to become mentors because of the personal satisfaction it gives them to contribute to the growth and development of a young professional. They have an unselfish attitude toward the protégé and take time from their own priorities to work with and for them.

**M**entors possess skills and abilities that are invaluable to the protégé. The mentor has learned many valuable lessons and has organizational insight that newcomers don't. When the mentor imparts the knowledge and the protégé heeds the learning, the path to career success for the protégé becomes easier.

As superior performers in an organization, mentors have developed a keen awareness of the political workings of an organization. Mentors identify and openly discuss with their protégés the individual(s) who holds the power, and what process they use to make resource decisions for the organization. They share unwritten policies and expectations of the organization. The protégé becomes privy to the networking possibilities within the organization, and a good mentor will take advantage of the opportunities for socializing the protégé among the power figures.

The mentor will emphasize the importance of serving on prestigious committees and will identify those various committees, the task forces, and special assignments within the organization. It is not uncommon to find the mentor recommending the protégé's name to key people in the organization who have the authority for appointing committee members.

One of the most important roles for mentors is that of acting as a sounding board for protégé ideas. Mentors use critical questioning to help shape and direct the plans proposed by the protégés. They will provide a safe environment where protégés can make mistakes while implementing their plans without having their confidence destroyed.

Protégés look to mentors for career development advice. As achievement-oriented individuals, protégés are usually looking for ways to improve their overall job performance. Mentors are many times in a position to delegate challenging tasks, and thrusts the protégé into situations where he or she has no prior experience and training. By allowing the protégé to work independently, and at the same time providing feedback, the mentor provides the type of opportunities that allow the protégé to develop skills and abilities.

Another recognizable behavior of a mentor is that of promoting the protégé's achievements among upper management. Young professionals tend to overlook the importance of making their accomplishments known. It is through the mentor's association with the key individuals in the organization that the protégés' contributions and talents are made more visible.

Professionals who take responsibility for mentoring must

realize that in addition to all the good that comes from having an unselfish attitude and sharing skills and abilities with protégés, there are serious problems that can develop in the process.

The most serious problems that may develop from a mentoring relationship are: 1) the protégé may become overdependent on the mentor, 2) other employees may become jealous of the protégé, 3) top management may see the protégé as too closely assigned to the mentor, and 4) the protégé may not meet the expectations of the mentor.

During the mentoring process a supportive environment is created by the mentor that protects the protégé. Often the protégé is safeguarded from the results of his or her own mistakes. Mentors frequently withhold information from the protégé with the good intention of allowing the protégé to work independently without outside interference.

This controlled environment created by the mentor may set up a false sense of reality for the protégé. The protégé may become overly dependent on the mentor's support and may not be able to perform his or her job without it. In such situations, protégés begin to believe that they must consult with their mentor on every task to ensure its successful completion.

**C**o-workers, as well as other employees in the organization, may become resentfully suspicious of a protégé who seems to be the "favorite" in the office. Every employee wants to feel "special," and when their needs are neglected, they have a natural tendency to indict the protégé who appears to be receiving the favored treatment.

Another possible problem during the mentoring process is if top management sees the protégé too closely aligned with the mentor. Management may question whether the protégé can perform his or her duties without the mentor's assistance. Management may also label the mentor as an unfair advocate of the protégé. They may discredit the mentor's opinion on management talent because they perceive that the mentor will only push for his or her protégé.

One other problem that may occur is a protégé failing to meet the performance expectations of the protégé. Sometimes the mentor's expectations are just too far-reaching for the protégé's capabilities. Other times it may be that certain circumstances arise during the protégé's career that alter his or her aspirations.

Regardless of the nature of the mentoring problems that develop, both the mentor and the protégé must deal openly with them. If they ignore the problems, they can destroy not only the mentoring process, but the reputation of both parties.

When the mentoring process is effective and the problems minimized, the benefits to the protégé, mentor, and the organization are extraordinary. To the protégé, the

mentoring process has brought both tangible and intangible results. In research findings, protégés have stated that as a result of their mentor's assistance, they have had early promotions to higher levels. Many indicated that their job functions had been expanded and their job titles enhanced. Another benefit was that their opinions were respected and they received prestigious appointments to committees, and were called on to participate in special meetings.

In terms of intangible benefits, protégés stated that they feel "valued" and "special" because of the relationship. They were given opportunities to expand and improve and were challenged to think clearly and make difficult decisions. Through this atmosphere of expectation, protégés asserted that their self-confidence increased and that they became more aware of their own strengths and weaknesses.

**B**enefits are also clearly evident for the mentor. Besides the personal satisfaction the mentor receives from watching their protégé grow and develop in their careers, mentors also earn the reputation as a person who can clearly recognize achievement-oriented young professionals and help them actualize their potential. Over the years, good mentors develop a cadre of protégés who greatly contribute to the mentor's reputation.

Effective mentoring relationships also work in favor for the organization. Mentors instill their protégés with the values and expectations of the organizations. This ensures that the philosophy and norms are passed along to talented young leaders who will shape the future of the organization. Organizations also benefit from the high morale and increased loyalty that emanate from the mentoring relationship.

Mentoring is a management phenomenon that has been an extremely important factor in many of today's parks and recreation professionals development. Now the challenge is for these individuals to make it a priority to become mentors. The future leadership of the parks and recreation field will be with the protégés that are developed today.

*EDITOR'S NOTE: For a list of references accompanying this article, contact the author at Florida State University, Leisure Services Studies, 215 Stone Bldg., Tallahassee, FL 32306-3001.*